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## Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy

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the primacy of domestic issues, the construction of "Socialism in One Country," in Stalin's scheme of things.

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Volkogonov, Dmitri. Harold Shukman, trans. *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991. 642pp. \$29.95  
General Dmitri Volkogonov's book is a powerful biography of one of the central figures of twentieth-century history. It is primarily a political biography, but readers will find that the author also addresses aspects of diplomatic and military affairs. Needless to say, any work that improves our understanding of Stalin is noteworthy.

Volkogonov, currently an adviser to Boris Yeltsin, is not the typical Stalin biographer. A retired Soviet Army colonel general, former deputy chief of the Main Political Section of the Soviet military and former head of the Institute of Military History, Volkogonov served his country admirably and loyally, despite the fact that his own father was arrested and executed during Stalin's purges in the late 1930s. Volkogonov, who also earned a Ph.D. from the Lenin Military Academy, began to question the system, and its history, in the 1950s. The advent of Mikhail Gorbachev allowed him to complete his work, and the original Russian-language edition of *Stalin* appeared in the Soviet Union

in 1988. Volkogonov then turned his attention to a comprehensive study of Lenin and, at the Institute of Military History, began writing and directing work on a planned ten-volume, glasnost-era Soviet history of the Second World War.

Unfortunately, in the spring of 1991 Volkogonov's honesty and revisionism led to confrontation with senior Soviet military leaders, including Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev (then Mikhail Gorbachev's military adviser), General Mikhail Moiseyev (then chief of the general staff), and Dmitri Yazov (then minister of defense). One Soviet official, upset by Volkogonov's quest for truth, chided the Institute of Military History's director, "The documents should be used according to the purpose they are intended for." But Volkogonov, repelled by this challenge to history, told his accusers, "We don't need sugary patriotism, we need the truth." Volkogonov resigned, announcing that he could not "write a false history."

The author's sense of openness and honesty and his unparalleled access to official military and Communist Party archives set this biography of Stalin apart. According to Volkogonov, some of the triumphs achieved by the Soviet people in the 1930s and 1940s are attributable to the system, although many others were achieved in spite of, not because of, Stalin's handiwork. And of course Volkogonov recounts in detail the tragedy of a people condemned to suffer and languish under the weight of the cruel,

ineffective, Stalinist super-bureaucracy.

The book's strongest sections are those that deal with the decades of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Until the early 1930s, many of the Bolsheviks' opponents, including dissenters within the party, left the Soviet Union, some voluntarily, some not. Their accounts have long provided Western historians with a fairly accurate picture of the workings of the Soviet system in its early years—for example, Lenin's deathbed doubts about Stalin's character. However, once Stalin completely established his personal political control, few escaped the Soviet Union with their lives, and little inside information found its way to the West. Thus, while Volkogonov's biography offers little that is new about the dictator's rise to power or the early revolutionary period in Russia, the author does provide details of the purges, the war, and Stalin's final years that are chilling in their revelations.

The account is replete with insight into Stalin's paranoia, brutality, decisionmaking, conduct of war and peace, and obsession with power. Volkogonov describes how Stalin's terror gained a momentum of its own and spread uncontrollably throughout Soviet society. The author has discovered the lists of the condemned, initialled by Stalin himself. We read Stalin's comments written in the margins of reports on the progress of the purge trials. Volkogonov recounts Stalin's desperate efforts to keep war

from engulfing the Soviet Union and testing the resilience of what was, in fact, a politically shaky regime. He quotes Ministry of Defense documents to show that Marshal Georgi Zhukov, chief of the general staff in early 1941, proposed a preemptive strike against the Germans as they concentrated along the Soviet border. But Stalin remained committed to a defensive strategy, and moreover, one focused on the southern part of the front. Then, Volkogonov paints a remarkable picture of a shaken Stalin ready, once the war began, to surrender vast tracts of Soviet territory to buy peace. Finally, in 1945 and 1946 Stalin shaped domestic and foreign policies that ensured that the wartime triumphs of the Soviet people would be lost amidst the tragedy of Stalinism. Of Churchill's famous March 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech Volkogonov writes, "This was true. Soon after the war, Stalin had taken energetic measures to reduce all contact with the West and the rest of the world. A curtain, whether of iron or ideology, had decidedly come down. . . ."

Most of the details in Volkogonov's book are not revelations to those familiar with Soviet history. However, it allows us to move from the realm of educated speculation to knowledge based on official sources. Churchill described it as an enigma: "Russia . . . is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. . . ." Thanks to honest, brave individuals such as Dmitri Volkogonov, Russia's

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often dark and painful secrets are now being revealed.

Despite its strengths, this work is not without flaws. Its prose and organization are uneven, although whether the fault lies with the author or editor-translator is unclear. Volkogonov also seems uncertain about just where to place responsibility for the Soviet tragedy. Was everything solely Stalin's fault? Or were the problems, in part at least, attributable to the system he inherited from Lenin? Volkogonov appears to be a man going through a personal and extremely painful catharsis as he calls into question the legitimacy of the very system he served for most of his adult life.

Volkogonov's *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* is an extremely poignant and important work. Anyone with an interest in the history of Russia, the Second World War, the early Cold War period, the twentieth century, or the story of human progress (and regression) will find this biography engrossing.

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Kennedy, Paul. *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Random House, 1992. 428pp. \$25

Students of strategy will view the publication of Paul Kennedy's book with great anticipation. After all, his previous book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, turned out to be of interest to many more than scholars;

selling nearly a quarter of a million copies, it had a profound impact on the view Americans hold of the world around us. *Rise and Fall* looked at the grand sweep of history and the forces which cause nations to gain and lose strength, and it triggered widespread debate on whether or not the United States had reached its apogee and was following earlier powers into the second rank of nations.

*Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* picks up some of those same themes of growth and decline but goes beyond the constraints of the previous book to look at the forces at work both beyond and within national boundaries, and even forces mutating those boundaries. Readers who enjoyed the parts of *Rise and Fall* where the author speculated on present and future trends will be especially pleased with this text, which does quite a bit of sketching of directions that the future might take. Kennedy, as should not surprise those who see him as a "don" of the "declinist school," is rather gloomy about our prospects. In his prologue he evokes Thomas Malthus, the dour British economist of the eighteenth century, in a discussion of the perils of increasing population. However, while glum, Kennedy does not give in to defeatism, nor does he portray the problems he outlines as immutable. Instead he refers to them as challenges, which he encourages leaders of the world to face.

The bulk of the work is divided into two major parts. The first, "General Trends," looks at forces currently